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Competencies Needed for Entry-Level Student Affairs Work: Views from Mid-Level Professionals

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Abstract
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COMPETENCIES NEEDED FOR ENTRY-LEVEL STUDENT AFFAIRS WORK: VIEWS FROM MID-LEVEL PROFESSIONALS

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The ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies for Student Affairs were designed to articulate skills needed for effective practice. However, since its first publication in 2010, little research has been done to understand whether these competencies align with the skills needed to be successful student affairs professionals. This qualitative study examined mid-level supervisors' perceptions of the skills needed for effective entry-level student affairs work and compared these responses to the ACPA/NASPA competencies. Mid-level manager's perceptions of skills aligned with stated competencies with some minor discrepancies noted. These findings have implications for practice, graduate preparation programs, potential revisions to the competencies and future research.

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In 2010, College Student Educators International (ACPA) and Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education (NASPA), informed by research and the practical experiences of prominent scholars and leaders in the field, published the first edition of Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners (hereafter referred to as the Joint Statement) (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). The Joint Statement outlined 10 competencies for effective student affairs work. A second version of the Joint Statement followed in late summer 2015; the competencies were revised but the purpose of the competencies remained the same: "to set out the scope and content of professional competencies required of student affairs educators in order for them to succeed within the current higher educational environment as well as projected future environments" (p. 7).

Since their inception, these competencies have been used in a variety of ways. Graduate preparation programs have utilized them in curriculum planning and alignment (DiRamio, 2014) and the NASPA national conference maps professional development opportunities to the competencies (NASPA, n.d.). Practitioners may use the competencies to develop job descriptions, for self-assessment, or in conducting performance reviews (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, 2015; Wise & Hatfield, 2014).

The competencies are becoming more widely utilized but little is known if these reflect the actual work of student affairs professionals. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the alignment between the espoused competencies and the enacted work of entry-level professionals. If these competencies are to be used for graduate curricula development, professional development and performance evaluations, it is important to assess whether these competencies reflect skills required of effective student affairs professionals. We focused on the alignment of competencies of entry-level professionals by eliciting perspectives of mid-level professionals who hire, train, and supervise them.

Specifically, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What skills are needed to be effective in an entry-level student affairs position?
2. How do skills needed by entry-level professionals align with the Joint Statement?

We conducted this study using the 2010 Joint Statement, prior to the release of the 2015 revision. Because practitioners and graduate programs increasingly are adopting the competencies, we felt it important to understand how the competencies aligned with the work of student affairs professionals rather than await the revision. Our data and findings provide relevant, valuable perspectives to inform the current and future role of competencies within the student affairs profession.

Literature Review

Student affairs professionals have many responsibilities within higher education institutions, including serving the needs of students with increasingly diverse backgrounds and perspectives (Renn & Reason, 2013), educating students and supporting the overall learning mission of higher education (Keeling & Associates, 2006), and responding to persistent accountability pressures (Schuh, 2009). Consequently, student affairs professionals must have knowledge in a variety of areas, including student development, social justice, leadership, legal issues, and assessment and research (Bell, 2013; Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013; Lovell & Kosten, 2000).

Studies of knowledge and skills needed for effective student affairs practice date to the late 1960s (O'Banion, 1969). Advising and helping skills, student development theory, multicultural knowledge, professional ethics, and oral and written communication have consistently been identified as requisite core knowledge for student affairs professionals (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Dickerson et al., 2011; Hoffman

& Bresciani, 2012; Kretovics, 2002; Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Waple, 2006).

Over time, the broader context of social progress and political pressures have prioritized different knowledge and skills. Knowledge of technology; advocacy for social justice and inclusion; and skills in assessment, management, and budgeting have become necessary for student affairs professionals (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, 2015; Herdlein et al., 2013; Lovell & Kosten, 2000). The meta-analysis by Herdelin, et al. indicated that professionals also need knowledge and skills related to legal issues, self-awareness, and critical reflection. These core and emerging knowledge and skills are confirmed by the broad themes identified in the Delphi study by Burkard, Cole, Ott, and Stoflet (2005): human qualities and interpersonal skills, adaptability, decision making, administrative and management skills, and research and assessment skills.

The student affairs profession typically relies on graduate programs to prepare entry-level candidates with the requisite knowledge and skills for professional work (Ardoin, 2014; Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2007) and most graduate programs align with standards set forth by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2015), the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2014), or both. These standards provide some assurance of program-level quality and consistency of preparation for work within the highly varied system of U.S. higher education. The Joint Statements (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, 2015) detail individual-level competencies and, subsequently are guiding curriculum decisions and course learning outcomes (DiRamio, 2014). If graduate programs, entrusted with preparing new professionals for entry-level positions are to apply the competencies accordingly, and student affairs departments are using these competencies to identify effective work, it is critical to examine whether these stated competencies align with the work of effective professionals.

A Competency Model for Student Affairs

The development of a competency model symbolizes the professionalization of a field (Klegon, 1978). Competency models have been used in a variety of professions for decades (Campion et al., 2011; McClelland, 1973) to define the nature of professional work and clarify overarching professional goals, values, and expectations through common language (Rodriguez, Patel, Bright, Gregory, & Gowing, 2002). The Society for Human Resource Management (n.d.) identifies competencies for the human resource profession that guide professional development and hiring. The American Association of Engineering Societies (AAES) and the US Department of Labor developed a competency model for engineering to help current and future engineers, educators, and employers identify and understand the skills needed to be effective (AAES, n.d.).

Competency models typically guide hiring and performance evaluations, professional development, and strategic planning (Lawler, 1994; Rodriguez et al., 2002; Rowe, 1995). The competencies articulated in the Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, 2015) and measured by the newly validated National Survey of Student Affairs Professionals (Sriram, 2014) represent a new addition to the realm of professional competency models.

The 2010 Joint Statement coalesced findings from the literature along with the thinking of senior student affairs scholars and leaders into a single competency model outlining, "the broad professional knowledge, skills, and, in some cases, attitudes, expected of student affairs professionals regardless of their area of specialization or positional role" (p. 3). The initial 10 competencies were:

- Advising and Helping
- Assessment, Evaluation, and Research;
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion;
- Ethical Professional Practice;
- History, Philosophy, and Values;

- Human and Organizational Resources;
- Law, Policy, and Governance;
- Leadership;
- Personal Foundations; and
- Student Learning and Development.

Each competency included three different levels (basic, intermediate, and advanced). Although practitioners are expected to maintain basic levels of proficiency across all competencies, the Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) acknowledged that some positions require advanced knowledge and skills on certain competencies. A task force convened in October 2014 gathered feedback on current competencies and considered the 2010 competency model in light of the evolving context of student affairs practice. Substantive changes included the addition of a Technology competency (previously described as a "thread" in the 2010 Joint Statement) and renaming of the Advising and Helping competency to Advising and Supporting. The Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion competency was renamed Social Justice and Inclusion to emphasize the profession's active commitment to social justice; the two competencies previously known as Ethical Professional Practice and Personal Foundations were combined into a single competency for Personal and Ethical Foundations. The three levels remained, though the basic level was relabeled "foundational" to connote a starting point for continued development (ACPA & NASPA, 2015) The breadth of the model offered by the Joint Statement sought to capture core and emerging knowledge and skills and signal further professionalization of the student affairs field (Burkard et al., 2005). Consistent with competency models for other professions, the Joint Statement intended to articulate a widely agreed-upon set of knowledge and skills for student affairs professionals.

Conceptual Framework

Competency models help articulate job performance requirements (Rodriguez et al., 2002), but their value depends upon four assumptions: they must be measurable and transparent (Voorhees, 2001); they must be agreed upon and understood by stakeholders (Bers, 2001); they must be valid, reflecting what is needed to be effective (Voorhees, 2001); and they must be reliable across a variety of contexts and audiences (U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Vazirani, 2010; Voorhees, 2001).

We used the U.S. Department of Education Hierarchy of Postsecondary Outcomes Model (2002) as our conceptual framework. This model views competencies, knowledge, skills, and traits hierarchically. Traits provide a foundation for the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for a profession (i.e., student affairs), and competencies are the culmination of the knowledge, skills, and abilities (see Figure 1 on next page). This framework illustrates the need to assess the relationship among competencies, knowledge, skills, and traits; it subsequently provides rationale for our study of the alignment of student affairs competencies with skills needed for effective practice by entry-level professionals.

Previous research on knowledge and skills needed for effective professional practice, along with calls from ACPA and NASPA for member input, informed the development and subsequent revision of the Joint Statement (2010, 2015). This study contributes to ongoing conversations in our field about competent and effective practice. Given the importance of the established competencies to professionals' preparation, we believe it is imperative to seek the perspectives of those mid-level professionals who hire, train, and supervise them. Discrepancies revealed by these professionals may suggest further revisions to the competencies.

Methods

We employed qualitative research methods to examine mid-level professionals' perceptions of the competencies needed for effective entry-level student affairs work. Qualitative research methods were deemed appropriate as they allowed for

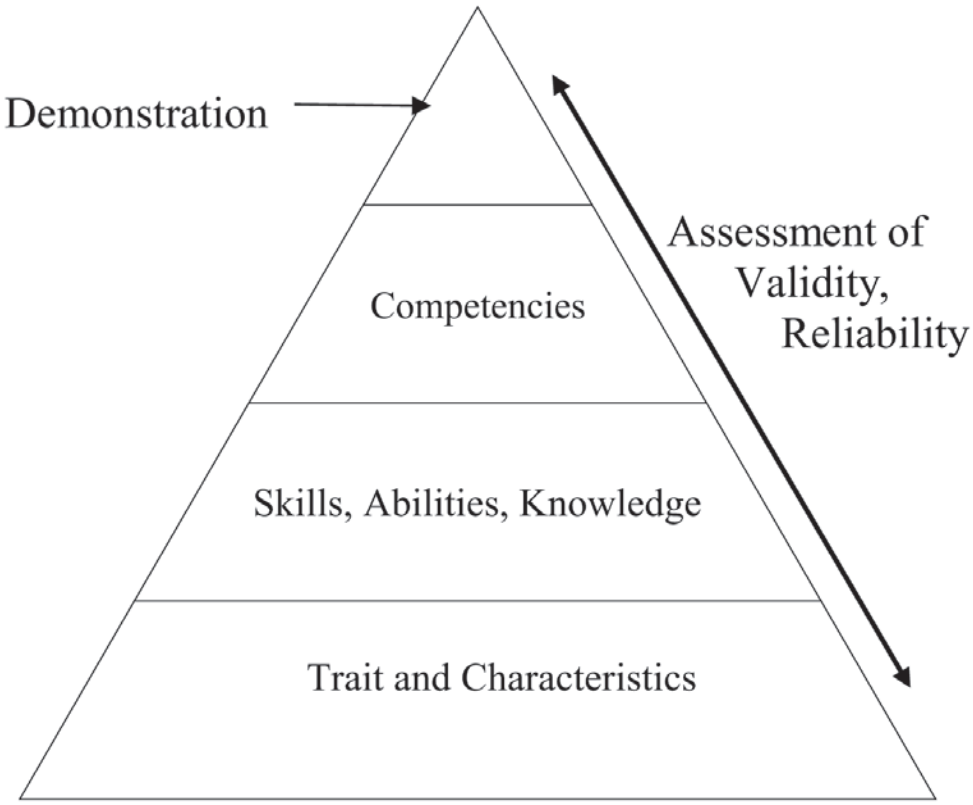

Figure 1. Conceptual map of the Postsecondary Outcomes. Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, 2002.

deeper understanding of a phenomenon not possible with quantitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research methods also address "what" and "why" questions, such as "what skills are needed for effective entry-level work" and "why are these skills needed?" We framed this study with an interpretivist framework that utilized human interpretation of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Specifically, we were interested in mid-level professionals interpretation of the skills needed for effective entry-level professional work. We collected data through semi-structured interviews with 17 mid-level professionals. Interviews were appropriate for this study because they allowed for in-depth collection and examination of data from a variety of individuals (Creswell; Merriam; Rubin & Rubin). Institutional Review Board approval was received prior to collecting data.

Participants

We used purposeful criterion, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We sought participants who met the following criteria: three years minimum of full-time professional student affairs experience, employed in a mid-level position (i.e., experience beyond master's degree preferred or required), and supervised at least one entry-level professional at the time of recruitment. Recognizing that student affairs work differs by institutional type (Hirt, 2006), we recruited participants from a range of institutions and functional areas (Dungy & Gordon, 2003). We began by recruiting participants in proximity to the researchers at a large, public, doctoral institution in the Midwest and a large, regional comprehensive university in the Southeast.

We also identified participants from other institutional types among attendees at a national student affairs conference in Spring 2014. After each interview, we asked participants to recommend other individuals who fit the criterion.

In total, we interviewed 17 participants representing 4 different institutional types, 11 administrative units, and 3 U.S. geographic regions and Canada (Table 1). Participants' supervision experience ranged from 2 to more than 25 years. All but 4 of the participants had supervised at least 8 entry-level professionals throughout their careers with 2 participants having supervised more than 50 individuals.

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected data through topical individual interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) that followed a semi-structured protocol (Creswell, 2013) which allowed for follow-up questions to probe responses to a list of prescribed open-ended questions. Interviews focused on two primary questions: (a) What skills and knowledge do you look for in hiring entry-level student affairs professionals? and (b) What skills and knowledge do entry level professionals need to be successful in their positions? Additional questions probed whether skills and knowledge were position- or department-specific (e.g. admissions) or applicable across entry-level positions and departments (Merri-

Table 1. Administrative Unit, Institutional Type, and Geographic Location of Participants

Administrative Unit	**Institutional Type**	**Geographic**
Admissions	Four-year, Public, Large, Doctoral Level	Midwest
Campus Recreation	Four-year, Public, Mid-sized, Master's Level	Southeast
Counseling Center	Four-year, Public, Mid-sized, Master's Level	Southeast
Dean of Students	Four-year, Public, Large, Doctoral Level	Midwest
Dean of Students	Two-year, Public, Associate's Level	Canada
Disability Services	Four-year, Public, Mid-sized, Master's Level	Southeast
Financial Aid	Four-year, Public, Large, Doctoral Level	Midwest
Judicial Affairs	Four-year, Public, Mid-sized, Master's Level	Southeast
Judicial Affairs	Four-year, Public, Mid-sized, Doctoral Level	Northeast
Judicial Affairs	Four-year, Public, Large, Doctoral Level	Midwest
Multicultural Student Affairs	Four-year, Public, Large, Doctoral Level	Midwest
Residence Life	Four-year, Public, Mid-sized, Master's Level	Southeast
Residence Life	Four-year, Public, Mid-sized, Doctoral Level	Northeast
Residence Life	Four-year, Public, Large, Doctoral Level	Midwest
Residence Life	Four-year, Public, Large, Doctoral Level	Midwest
Student Health Center	Four-year, Public, Mid-sized, Master's Level	Southeast
Student Leadership	Four-year, Public, Mid-sized, Master's Level	Southeast

am, 2002). Fourteen of the interviews were conducted in person, two interviews used video conferencing, and one interview took place over the phone. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. We audiotaped and transcribed interviews and used inductive coding procedures (Seidman, 1998) to analyze the data. Each transcript was reviewed separately and data were coded into specific categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña, 2009).

Researcher Positionality, Trustworthiness, and Limitations

We acknowledge our positionality as researchers. We both have significant professional experience in student affairs, including the supervision of numerous entry-level professionals; we are now faculty members in graduate preparation programs. Our previous experiences in the field and current roles preparing new professionals influenced our approaches to data collection and analysis. To minimize potential bias, we developed trustworthiness through triangulation of data and peer review with three investigators who reviewed transcripts and analyzed data (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Our small sample size limits generalizability, but like other qualitative studies, we sought a greater depth of understanding of the competencies to complement quantitative analyses (e.g., Sriram, 2014).

Findings

This study identified the skills mid-level supervisors perceived as needed for success by entry-level professionals and, through our analysis, we examined how these skills aligned with the competencies set forth in the 2010 Joint Statement (APCA & NASPA) Findings highlight key themes that emerged from the interviews.

Asked what skills were necessary for the entry-level professionals they supervised to be successful in their positions, midlevel professionals frequently cited communication, interest in working with students, collaboration, advising skills, awareness of organizational and institutional cultures and associated politics, the ability to conduct assessments and use data to inform decisions, professionalism, and knowledge of multiculturalism and diversity.

As participants discussed competencies needed for entry-level student affairs professionals, several themes emerged: (a) emphasis on broader, transferable skills versus specific skills, (b) approach to work undergirds competencies, (c) importance of understanding context, (d) knowledge of assessment, (e) ability to adapt to different audiences, and (f) ability to know and apply content.

Emphasis on Broader, Transferable Skills versus Specific Skills

Participants mentioned that it is not necessary for entry-level professionals to possess in-depth knowledge of specific theories or content. A participant who works in disability services explained: "Even if you do not know student development theory by name, you know it by practice." Entry-level professionals may not need to recall specific elements of theories, but should understand the fundamentals of learning and success.

In some areas, such as recreation services, entry-level professionals may need prior experience and specific certifications to get hired and be successful. However, the majority of participants stressed the importance of transferable skills. For instance, applicants without prior experience in housing may be hired to work in residential life if they can articulate the usefulness of their past experiences to the residential environment. As one participant acknowledged, "I'm not necessarily looking for a lot of subject matter knowledge, that's easily trainable." Instead, mid-level supervisors seek individuals who can transfer prior knowledge into practice within a particular context.

Approach to Work Undergirds Competencies

Participants discussed skills and knowledge that were easy to teach, but also men-

tioned several qualities that were difficult to develop. Most of these qualities were not related to competencies or skills; rather, they focused on how individuals approached their work, interacted with students and colleagues, and demonstrated critical thinking. As one housing professional noted: "I can train on content but can't train someone to want to be there or [their] work ethic."

Several participants valued interpersonal skills. A participant with 20 years of experience stated the importance of interpersonal communication skills: "It is much harder to train on the human dynamic of dealing with people… that's just messiness, I mean, and so that's much harder to train on." The ability to connect with students and demonstrate empathy was cited as critical, even in areas where student interactions may be heavily policy-focused. As noted by one financial aid professional: "It is important to have good counseling, good listening, empathy skills because regardless of what area of student affairs you're working, obviously students are coming to us, it's our job to keep an eye out for them."

Another participant who works in student activities discussed successful professionals as those "who can work on their own autonomously without a lot of direction but can still take direction and work in a team."

A participant summarized the importance of several of these "approaches to work" for managing human dynamics and the unscripted nature of student affairs based on her 15 years supervising entry-level hall directors:

> You're working where students live, and so you're gonna see them at their very best, and very worst, and I…cannot train on every single little nuance. I want you to have some problem-solving skills and to have common sense, so when you're faced with some of those, even if it's not explicitly spelled out in the manual, you can kind of take the situation and run with it.

Importance of Understanding Context

Participants indicated that entry-level professionals must recognize that student affairs work frequently occurs within politicized contexts whether at the office, department, institution, or state level. "There's something to be said for … being able to navigate the political environment of an institution and the departments." More fundamentally, entry-level professionals must adapt to different institutional contexts when moving to new jobs and other colleges and universities. Even when equipped with significant prior experience in the same functional area, entry-level professionals must recognize how the work varies among institutions. As one residence life professional stated:

> I categorize it as an area that each new staff member has to come to grips with, and that is the adjustment to a particular institutional context, a departmental culture...and the challenges that are inherent in that process of learning those patterns either spoken or unspoken.

Knowledge of Assessment

Several participants told how increased pressure to demonstrate value and effectiveness means entry-level professionals must understand and know how to engage in assessment. Although they may not conduct complex assessments, entry-level professionals must be able to reply to data requests from other colleagues and help respond to demands from outside the division or institution. One participant noted how assessment skills regularly come in handy: "Every other week we're asking to quantify what we do, to show that we make a difference that shows that we have improved persistence….and you have to have those kinds of skills." A student counseling professional connected assessment skills with the fundamental student affairs role of designing programs:

> The ability to understand how assessment has to be on the very front end of program development. …as opposed to that sense of "well I'll just throw out

> what I think is gonna work", because in our field what's intuitive isn't necessarily what works.

Another participant noted the complementary nature of research and assessment:

> They need to be strong in assessment and research. Our work is very much informed by research but you need assessment to see how it plays out at the specific institution.

Adapting to Different Audiences

Every participant mentioned "communication skills" as a requisite entry-level competency. In areas where entry-level professionals are tasked with programming, oral and visual presentation skills were valued. Most frequently noted, however, were strong writing skills, specifically those related to business or technical writing. For example, participants mentioned the need to communicate effectively through email correspondence and worried that entry-level professionals may not recognize the importance of professionalism in email messages sent to administrators or parents. Participants commented that because entry-level professionals seem to rely on text messaging as their primary form of communication, "a simple email can sound like a text [message]."

One participant noted that in graduate school students may be used to writing longer papers, but entry-level professionals need to adapt for different audiences: "Learning to summarize and write one-page reports…. our VP of academics does not want a 20-page report about how orientation went, she wants a one-page bullet point summary of the highlights."

Ability to Know and Apply Content

Participants articulated differences between entry-level professionals' knowledge and the ability to apply knowledge in practice, particularly regarding student development theory, diversity, and social justice.

Student development theory. Several participants explained that entry-level practitioners are usually conversant with student development theory, but lack experience applying it to their work.

> Theory is good but putting it into practice and being able to understand that it won't always fit students is even better. I'm not as interested in their understanding of theory but interested in connections between the event and student learning.

Another participant mentioned that professionals need a healthy critique of theory:

> The theories are fairly limited and so I don't think they necessarily think about that. I think …they think that the theories are what they are, and that they're just kind of the pillars that we stand on and we're not thinking about how those theories have limitations or how they hold us back from working with students.

Or, as another participant summarized: "We try to shoehorn students into the theory rather than the other way around."

Some participants discussed how student development theories provide a basis for what to expect when working with students in certain professional positions. Commenting on policy violations, a judicial affairs professional noted that "theory can help entry-level professionals be patient with students." A mid-level residence life professional summarized that theory is helpful in

> …understanding what it means for college-age students, particularly 18- and 19-year-olds, to live in a community together. So it's helpful if they have some of that background in student development and theory to kind of understand how that's all gonna play out.

Diversity and social justice. Similar to student development theory, participants described entry-level professionals' limited abilities to apply concepts of diversity and social justice to their work. Participants recognized that because content and values related to equity, diversity, and inclusion feature prominently in many graduate

preparation programs, students are able to discuss these topics, but may find it more difficult to enact these values:

> I think people in student affairs tend to come out [of graduate programs] with a very strong understanding of social justice…ways to talk about diversity or diverse populations….it's become much more of a—an identified goal of the higher ed. programs….but you know, being able to talk about social justice and understanding social justice in a usable way are different.

Some participants recognized differences in entry-level professionals' content knowledge of diversity and social justice and their internalization of such knowledge into personal values. For example:

> I think entry-level professionals understand diversity and understand inclusion. When we talk about social justice, I think they get a little confused. But I think they could probably define it, and tell you it's good and probably tell you why it's good. But I think in terms of looking at their own cultural competence, I think it's a very big disconnect. [Entry-level professionals can say] this is why it's good for the university and this is why it's good for our students, but to look at one's self and say – "here is how my various identities play into the work I do" is a struggle.

Discussion

Data from the individual interviews helped us address the two research questions that guided this study.

What skills are needed to be effective in an entry-level student affairs position?

Participants offered a set of knowledge and skills that entry-level professionals need to be effective: communication, social justice and inclusion, understanding of institutional culture and politics, interest in working with and knowledge of students, advising, and assessment. Participants recognized that certain positions (e.g., health educator) require specific certifications, but noted many skills that all entry-level professionals need regardless of job placement.

Our results were consistent with past studies on competencies for entry-level professionals that also identified essential skills such as communication and multicultural knowledge (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Waple, 2006), and assessment and the ability to apply knowledge and theory to practice (Dickerson et al., 2011). Burkard et al. (2005) identified the importance of adaptability for navigating new circumstances or environments and our participants concurred that this skill was particularly important in transitioning to new institutional cultures.

How do skills needed for entry-level professional success align with the Joint Statement?

Though our study utilized the initial 2010 Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA), our findings remain relevant for the 2015 revision. Accordingly, we discuss findings here in connection to both the initial and revised Joint Statements. This approach keeps our discussion current and helps readers more readily relate our findings to their work, while maintaining the integrity of our research design. When naming specific competencies, we utilize those provided in the 2015 Joint Statement.

The majority of skills listed by mid-level professionals align with the ACPA/NASPA competencies. Some of the skills noted, such as advising, assessment and evaluation, understanding of diversity, and knowledge of student development theory directly aligned with several competencies - specifically Advising and Supporting; Assessment, Evaluation, and Research; Social Justice and Inclusion; and Student Learning and Development competencies. In addition to identifying specific knowledge and skills, mid-level professionals consistently mentioned professionalism or approach to work as a necessary disposition for entry-level staff. This finding is consistent with other studies that describe professionalism as a

necessary quality for successful student affairs practice (e.g., Burkard et al., 2005).

Participants mentioned that effective practitioners must possess strong communication skills. Although communication is not one of the 10 ACPA/NASPA competencies, its importance is evident throughout the 2010 and 2015 Joint Statements. In the 2010 Joint Statement, the ability to communicate appeared as a vital component of what is now the Advising and Supporting competency as it relates to nonverbal communication and understanding communications strengths and limitations. The 2015 Joint Statement recognized that "student affairs practice requires proficiency in many areas….such as oral and written communication" (p. 7), and capacity for effective communication featured prominently in the Advising and Supporting, Organization and Human Resource, and Student Learning and Development competencies.

Our participants encouraged entry-level professionals to make the effort to learn about and understand their institutional context. They also spoke of seeking entry-level colleagues who are able to transfer skills into new contexts and positions. The 2015 Joint Statement added language related to transferable skills that called for student affairs practitioners to "be mindful of the unique missions, contexts, and needs of various colleges, universities and professional associations" (p. 10). The results of this study support this additional focus in the 2015 Joint Statement.

During the interview most of the skills participants listed were aligned with the competencies but other competencies were neglected. Similar to Waple's (2006) study, participants did not identify skills related to the Law, Policy, and Governance or the Values, Philosophy, and History competencies, nor did they discuss them as necessary competencies for entry-level professionals. Participants mentioned knowledge of policies and rules as critical, but only in relation to specific institutional contexts. Skills such as budgeting and financial management that are related to the Organizational and Human Resource competency were seen as important, though participants acknowledged that few entry-level professionals have opportunity to gain these skills before assuming their first professional position.

Participants also distinguished between knowledge and application of competencies. As mentioned earlier, the Joint Statements outlined three levels of competencies; progression from basic/foundational to advanced requires an evolution from knowledge to application (Joint Statement, 2015). We may often assume that entry-level positions require only foundational-level competence, but our participants argued the need for more new professionals to have advanced abilities to apply knowledge to their work related to Social Justice and Inclusion and Student Learning and Development.

In summary, many of the skills identified by mid-level professionals aligned with the initial competencies outlined in the 2010 Joint Statement on which we based our study, and confirmed revisions released in 2015. The 2010 document lists examples of how competencies may be used and the 2015 Joint Statement provides suggestions for applying the competencies in practice and in graduate preparation programs. Similarly, our findings have implications for practice, graduate preparation programs, and future research.

Implications for Practice

Competency models are a hallmark of professional work (Rodriguez et al., 2002) and the Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, 2015) represents an effort to advance student affairs as a profession (Burkard et al., 2005). As the competencies become more integrated throughout student affairs, research examining the alignment between espoused competencies and other student affairs professionals' perceptions of the knowledge and skills needed to be successful is critical. Our results suggest overall alignment between mid-level professionals' perceptions of skills needed by entry-level

professionals and the comptencies, though nuances exist. For example, mid-level professionals did not mention the importance of historical knowledge (i.e. Values, Philosophy, and History competency). Although this could be interpreted as not important for entry-level work, we would argue that understanding historical events and their implications is necessary for effective social justice advocacy. Additionally, our study illustrates that some competencies may be more important at different career points. Budgeting, supervision, and policy development skills found within the Organizational and Human Resource competency are necessary skills for student affairs professionals but may not be required for success in many entry-level positions.

Findings of this study remind us that entry-level professionals, as the term implies, are new to the field. The competencies can be helpful in outlining expectations for new staff and also for individualizing professional development plans.

Competency surveys, used ethically, provide a helpful metric for this process (Sriram, 2014); they could be used to match entry-level professionals with seasoned colleagues for mentoring, and may also provide supervisors with a roadmap for guiding new entry-level staff members' professional development.

Professional development, during and beyond employee orientation, must also address the culture and context of the institution and department, including key political issues and relationships. Institutional and organizational histories, professional culture, and valued processes for getting work done provide crucial contextual information for successfully navigating any new job, especially for new professionals. As they settle into their jobs, such information reminds entry-level professionals that "where you work matters" (Hirt, 2006).

Implications for Graduate Preparation Programs

Most graduate programs emphasize generalist preparation for positions in different functional areas of student affairs and our findings affirm this approach. Students often worry about taking the "correct" courses and having the "right" assistantships or internships. Our results, however, suggest developing oral and written communication skills, proficiencies working both independently and collaboratively, and capabilities for adapting to different organizational cultures may be as important as content knowledge or experience in a particular area. The 2015 Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA) articulates the importance of communication and the ability to adapt to different organizational cultures, and collaboration is a theme that runs through all of the competencies. Therefore, graduate preparation programs that focus only on the 10 competencies without recognizing and applying the contextual information also found in the Joint Statement will provide students with a limited understanding of the importance and application of the competencies.

Our findings indicate that coursework and experience in research and assessment are critical to address the Assessment, Evaluation, and Research competency. Learning how to use data in decision making and how to conduct assessments will be critical for professional achievement and the success of the profession, especially in light of increased accountability and fiscal pressures (Schuh, 2009).

Participants noted that important "approach to work" skills, such as written and oral communication for different audiences, timeliness, and teamwork are "difficult to train." Graduate programs may develop these skills through pedagogies that mirror practice. Writing memos or executive summaries in addition to full-length research papers can expose students to forms of written communication utilized in practice. Group projects, peer feedback, and accountability for late or missing work may signal professional expectations and help ready students for the workplace.

Most graduate curricula address devel-

opment of competencies in social justice, inclusion, student learning, and development through coursework devoted specifically to these content areas. Participants observed that some entry-level professionals struggle when applying this knowledge to professional practice. Relatedly, participants noted that entry-level professionals lack reflection and meaning-making skills needed to connect their work to their educational experiences. Graduate faculty members and field experience supervisors must intentionally help students bridge classroom and experiential learning, reiterating Reason and Kimball's (2012) call to connect theory to practice through reflexivity.

Implications for Future Research

Little research has been conducted that examines the alignment of the ACPA/NASPA competencies with requisite skills for entry-level practitioners. Our study provides a nuanced view of the connection between espoused and enacted competencies focused specifically on entry-level professionals. We conducted our study using the 2010 Joint Statement, prior to the release of the 2015 revision. The revision illustrates the dynamic and evolving nature of the students affairs profession, and highlights the importance of engaging in continuous and systematic inquiry to ensure that professional competencies accurately reflect the knowledge and skills needed daily for effective professional practice.

Our research focused on the competencies entry-level professionals currently possess but did not investigate how professionals gain additional competencies. Future research could examine how student affairs professionals develop competencies over time or at certain career stages thus providing insights into those instigative experiences, strategies, and career events important for competency development.

Conclusion

The competencies articulated by the Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2015) help define what it means to be a student affairs professional. As the competencies become more integrated throughout student affairs practice and graduate preparation programs and as they continue to evolve, regular study of the degree to which they reflect the enacted work of student affairs professionals becomes increasingly important. By highlighting substantial areas of alignment and notable discrepancies, our study makes defining professional work in student affairs a bit more precise.

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